Learning from Luther on Christian discipleship

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Old caricatures portray Anabaptists with a corner on discipleship and Lutherans with a corner on God's grace. Although a kernel of truth is often present in such ways of identifying a tradition's theological emphases, caricatures ought to be starting points for conversation, clarification, and joint worship of God rather than being used to make quick judgments and to separate believers. As a result of recent conversation, confession, and reconciliation between Lutherans and Mennonites, these old caricatures are giving way to fresh discussion and collaboration.[1] Lutherans are studying discipleship in new ways, sometimes looking to Anabaptist-Mennonites. And Mennonites in North America and Europe over the last forty years have been nuancing their understandings of discipleship in conversation with representatives of various Christian traditions, including Lutherans.

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This reflection on two images from the writings of Martin Luther is one attempt to look to a cousin in the faith for what Anabaptist-Mennonites might learn about discipleship. While Anabaptist-Mennonites have much to contribute on the topic of Christian discipleship—indeed, Anabaptism is hot these days, in part because many of our cousins are exploring discipleship—we can also learn new slants on this topic from our Reformation cousins.

Good Samaritan or hurt man?

A classic image of Christian faith is that of the good Samaritan stooping down to tend the wounds of a man who is lying in the

ditch. Christians in the West have cherished this image, supposing that it depicts us as the ones who help those in need. The Samaritan, we assume, represents the Christian, the in-control agent who aids the hurt man when others would pass by. The one in the ditch represents those in need of our assistance.

The Samaritan stopping to help, the oil and bandages, the transport to the inn, the coins passed to the innkeeper—these are simple, straightforward, acceptable images. When we hold up this canvas, it shows our faith as a practical faith, an ethical faith—one that joins with others the world over in serving those in need. When we are asked by people who do not believe, or in the court of public opinion, to defend Christianity, we can point to these scenes in the story of the Samaritan. This—at our best—is what Christians are like: we help others.

The image of one stopping to help another has even become a kind of commonsense ethic in our society, working its way into our legal provisions. "Good Samaritan" laws not only compel me to offer reasonable help if I see you in trouble but also protect me against litigation if I inadvertently hurt you in the act of offering aid. But in telling this story, did Jesus really have in mind the kind of legislation we know as Good Samaritan laws? Closer to home for those of us who are Christian, did Jesus really tell this story so that we could hold up an image of ourselves as good and helpful people?

When my daughter Abby was five years old, she and I had an extended back-and-forth on what to call this story in Luke 10:25–37. In her children's Bible the story was called "The Good Samaritan," but Abby would say, "Dad, can you tell me the story of the hurt man again?" I would say, "You mean 'The Good Samaritan,' right?" Again she would ask for the story of the hurt man. Finally I got it. Abby liked the Samaritan, to be sure: he was the hero of the story. But her identification was with the vulnerable one. Her understanding of the story was simple: if she were robbed and left in a ditch, she would want to be helped.

There was no "moral takeaway" here. Abby was just relieved that the Samaritan stopped—that he bandaged up the hurt man, took him to the inn, provided for his needs. Hearing this story left her with an uncomplicated sense of gratitude. She felt no guilt about some past event when she had failed to help another. Nor

did she feel obligation about some future event when she would encounter someone in need. She was simply thankful.

A different hermeneutic is at work when we call this the story of the hurt man rather than the good Samaritan. The story of the hurt man is a story of one who is vulnerable, in need of help. The story of the hurt man is a story of one who is not in control but instead is absolutely dependent. The story of the hurt man is uncomfortable for self-made, in-control people, like many Christians in dominant cultures. After all, we are the givers, the helpers. To be helped? To be the one stooped down to? If we read the parable as the story of the hurt man, we might need to redefine ourselves: Christians are those who recognize that they are in dire need of help.

Martin Luther's way of reading this Gospel story is similar to Abby's at the age of five. The focus is not on any of us as the agent of change but on all of us in our need for an agent of change. For Luther, we humans are all in dire need of Christ and salvation: the man in the ditch represents all of us, and the good Samaritan is Christ.[2] When read in this allegorical way, the Christian identifies with the receiver of help, not with the giver.

For Luther the man in the ditch whose wounds are bound and who is set on the donkey is already a disciple, for he is one who can receive the gift. Only those who receive and are thankful can in turn give to others.

Where, you may ask, does discipleship fit into this reading? For Luther, the in-the-ditch state of the human, along with the desire for help, is the beginning of discipleship. The question of discipleship for Luther is not What shall I do? but What has been given?[3] For Luther, discipleship—helping the neighbor—is necessary and even demanded by Christ ("Go and do likewise" [Luke 10:37]), but it must always begin with experiencing gifts given by God which we have done nothing to merit. The man in the ditch whose wounds are bound and who is set on the donkey (allegorically, the donkey is also Christ) is already a disciple, for he is one who can receive the gift. Only those who receive and are thankful can in turn give to others.

In "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels" (1521), Luther spells out his way of reading the stories of

Jesus and his parables. Jesus is first and foremost our Savior, the one who comes to us with gifts that can be received from no one else. Jesus is an example too, but only after he has been received as gift. Note that for Luther we do not simply sit back and observe what Jesus and others do in a given scene so as to learn how to be better disciples. We are first and foremost in the story as those who receive what Christ brings. Just as Christ comes to a given character in a scene, so Christ comes to us as we read and hear the Gospels. We are not observers of an action in first-century Palestine but participants in what Christ is doing right now to us:

> *When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift.*[4]

Christ is first gift *for us* and then—and only then—is he to serve as a model for the life of faith. Luther is not discounting Jesus as example, but Jesus can only be an example after he is received as gift:

> *Now that Christ is gift, the other follows: Now when you have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you. See, there faith and love move forward, God's commandment is fulfilled, and a person is happy and fearless to do and to suffer all things. Therefore make note of this, that Christ as a gift nourishes your faith and*

makes you a Christian. But Christ as an example exercises your works. These do not make you a Christian. Actually they come forth from you because you have already been made a Christian. As widely as a gift differs from an example, so widely does faith differ from works, for faith possesses nothing of its own, only the deeds and life of Christ. Works have something of your own in them, yet they should not belong to you but to your neighbor.[5]

This way of reading the Gospels leaves the Christian in a place of thankfulness that cannot but result in love and acts of kindness toward others. Near the close of his sermon on Luke 10:23–37, Luther—speaking for himself as one who was in the ditch and has been brought to the inn by Christ—notes that "health has indeed been poured into me and there is a turn for the better, but nevertheless I am not perfectly restored to health. Meantime Christ serves and purifies me by the grace he pours into me, so that day by day I become purer, chaster, milder, gentler and more believing until I die, when I shall be entirely perfect." But then, in his vintage style, Luther does not end his sermon with a focus on Christians becoming better, or on some notion of progress in the Christian life; rather, his final word goes to the vital importance of continuing to depend on God: "Thus all saints must do, however holy and pious they may be, they must lay on Christ's shoulders."

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Luther will always point the one who asks about Christian discipleship to Christ, who comes to us, addresses us in love, gives the gifts of oil (the Word) and wine (the cross), and carries us on his shoulders. While Luther had plenty to say about right and wrong, any of his commentary on Christian discipleship per se directs our attention back to devotion to God. One does not read the story from Luke 10 and strive to be good like the Samaritan. With regard to faith, the Christian is not in the position of power. We are the ditch-dwellers, those carried by Jesus who end up in the inn with thankful hearts and bodies being

restored to health. We are so grateful that we cannot help but serve others. Christians are the ones who wait for, yearn for, and yield to the Christ who strives to work in us. Discipleship is Christ working in and through us; it is not our attempts to imitate this or that action of Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

> *To be conformed to the image of Christ is not an ideal to be striven after. It is not as though we had to imitate him as well as we could. We cannot transform ourselves into his image; it is rather the form of Christ which seeks to be formed in us (Gal. 4:19), and to be manifested in us. Christ's work in us is not finished until he has perfected his own form in us. We must be assimilated to the form of Christ in its entirety, the form of Christ incarnate, crucified, and glorified.*[6]

Be opened!

Picture a human figure in a fetal position, with arms holding bent knees close to the torso. Here is the narcissist—seeing only the self, lost in the self, hugging the self. Salvation, according to Luther, unbends the human from this incurved posture and raises her to a standing position with eyes and ears wide open. Arms are not protecting the self but outstretched. Now the human can see God, the beauty of God's creation, and the blessings and needs of the other. Creation is new. This is how God wants all of us to live. This is what a disciple looks like.

Luther draws on the image of the incurved and opened up human in his sermon on Mark 7:31–37, preached on September 8, 1538.[7] Luther claims that "the whole earth is full with speaking," but humans are deaf: they are not listening to each other or to God—they are curved in on themselves. After meeting a man who is deaf and dumb, Jesus puts his fingers into the man's ears and on his tongue and cries, "Ephphatha!"—"Be opened!" Instantly the man's ears are opened and he speaks plainly. In Luther's sermon, it is not only Jesus who makes such a cry; God's creatures cry out in the same way for humanity to listen, and to open up: "Sheep, cows, trees when they bloom say: 'Ephphatha.'" God and creation cry out for humanity to allow Christ to uncurve them so that they can be open in body, soul, ear, eye, and spirit to worship God, enjoy creation, and serve each other.

Martin Luther is often charged with seeing faith in a more individualistic sense than his predecessors did. Luther certainly focuses on faith as a personal matter; however, in many respects, his view of faith stands in sharp contrast to our age's secular individualism—the kind that is often associated with consumerism in the West. The uncurved person is in fact released from looking only at the self and justifying the self and is set free to look on God, the beauty of the earth, and fellow believers, as well as those in the wider community. In Christ, the believer in fact loses himself, and lives in Christ. For Luther, uncurved people are freed from self-interest, the incurvature that limits their sight—free even from striving to please God through actions. The uncurved Christian is free to use the energy that was once dedicated to self-preservation and self-improvement for the praise of God and in love for the neighbor.[8]

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Faith and works, although Luther pitted them against each other in many places (he rarely missed an opportunity for polemics) are intimately connected in the following way:

> *Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. Oh it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. . . .*
>
> *Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes us glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, Christians are ready and glad to do*

good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown them this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.[9]

"Out of the depths I cry to you"

Martin Luther was a father and a husband, a teacher and preacher, an administrator and debater, a supporter of the poor and a critic of the rich.[10] He was also prone to mood swings and suffered from what we might now call severe depression. He could be insulting one moment and gentle the next. He was afflicted with feelings of failure, sin, and guilt, and at other times was in ecstasy over God's unmerited love. He didn't have it all together, as none of us does, but he lived with an awareness that he was being carried on the shoulders of Christ.

He wrote dozens of hymns, one of which includes this verse:

It is in God that we shall hope,
and not in our own merit.
We rest our fears in God's good Word
and trust the Holy Spirit,
whose promise keeps us strong and sure.
We trust the holy signature
of trust beyond all measure.

To my Mennonite ears, this hymn, "Out of the depths I cry to you," hardly sounds like a good discipleship hymn. But for Luther, any question of discipleship takes us right back to our utter dependence on God—what God has done, is doing, and will do. Before we ask, What shall we do? we are invited to turn our attention to what has been given us, and by whom. We may serve our neighbor generously, but ultimately it is the trustworthy promises of God that are our only hope of being "strong and sure," with eyes and hearts wide open to the world's blessings and our neighbors' needs.

Notes

[1] See for instance "Healing Memories, Reconciling in Christ: A Lutheran-Mennonite Guide for Congregations," by Allen Jorgenson and Margaret Loewen Reimer, at http://www.elcic.ca/Documents/Lutheran-MennoniteStudyGuidefinal_web.pdf.

[2] See Luther's "Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity; Luke 10:23–37," in *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 19–35.
[3] See Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies*, Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2007. Bayer's essays in this volume centre on discipleship and ethics as rooted in God's gifts of creation, peoplehood, and Christ. What has been given? is the central question for all ethical reflection.
[4] Martin Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels (1521)," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd ed., edited by Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 94.
[5] Ibid, 97.
[6] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 321.
[7] See *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1912–) 46:493–95; and Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 106–12.
[8] David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Allen Kelly, *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 25.
[9] Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Lull, 104.
[10] For a short book on Luther's life, see Martin Marty's *Martin Luther* (New York: Viking Books, 2004). For an account of Luther's life in connection with the social issues of his day, see Carter Lindberg, "Luther's Struggle with Social-Ethical Issues," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 165–78.

About the author

Allan Rudy-Froese joined the faculty of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) in 2011 as assistant professor of Christian proclamation. His doctoral dissertation (Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology, 2012) brings together Lutheran and Mennonite understandings of grace and ethics in the preached sermon. Allan lives in Goshen, Indiana, with his wife, Marilyn, and three children.